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ABSTRACT

A father describes how the public school system made his daughter, Charlie, into a disabled reader. Charlie had experienced early reading success both at home and in kindergarten, and enjoyed reading. Placed in the low reading group in first grade, Charlie resisted the dull, structured exercises of remedial reading instruction which she received throughout her elementary school years. Considered an unmotivated troublemaker, Charlie turned away from the standard curriculum and developed interests in other directions. In middle school she began a drive toward athletic acceptance; by this time, Charlie's father regularly received letters telling him that his daughter was "dumb." To recapture the good reading times at home, he introduced her to the Judy Blume books. She read them all, but would not perform for the public schools. Apparently, Charlie viewed middle school reading as a difficult decoding game having little to do with the meanings she found in the Blume books. In high school, Charlie participates in coursework in order to remain eligible for athletics, and it seems likely that she will graduate. Enrolling in graduate reading studies, Charlie's father found ways of learning to read other than drill and repetition, and attempted to turn Charlie from the school's ways of learning to more natural ways. In retrospect, he believes that he placed too much trust in the school system and in its grouping practices, and should have tried to intervene sooner. Charlie's problems are rooted in social separation, standardized test scores, and isolated, skill-based remedial instruction. The schools Charlie attended tracked her too early, and left her on track too long. Charlie and her father eventually shut down all accountability schemes offered by a sterile school system dominated by quantitative views of learning and replaced them with a view of knowledge as something to understand and analyze with the experiences children bring to their activities. (Forty-one references are attached.) (SR)

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Creating A Disabled Reader: A Father's Perspective

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Creating A Disabled Reader:
A Father's Perspective

> "Oh, Lord! Not I; I never read much; I have something else to do."
>
> Austen, 1818 ch. 7

Despite Austen's perception, one that may be frequently shared, people are always learning to read, to think, to live. Learning to read is hardly different from other types of human behavior. Goodman (1976) argues that people, young and old alike, purposely play a cognitive guessing game. They make predictions in everyday life situations, whether literate or not, but being literate makes the game easier to play. This is especially true in school related learning situations.

Parents want their children to be competent in reading so they can play the game on a level playing field. Yet, the public school reading game can be a "no win" situation when played in certain learning contexts. Despite the pervasiveness and ease Goodman and others have used to characterize the acquisition of literacy, my daughter Charlie has ended up sounding more like Austen. Let me tell you how Charlie came to side with Austen and how she and I coped with her reading struggles in our home and in several public schools.

Early reading success

Charlie is my second child. When she was born I was a high school teacher in a Texas public school. As a parent and a teacher, I thought I knew how to help her get ready for

school. Charlie lived in a print-rich lower middle-class home environment, exposed to countless books and magazines. Her sister and I were active readers, and competent literacy role models. We understood that reading with her was an important preparation for school. As with her older sister, I introduced Charlie early to books, pictures, and other print. I purchased books especially written for pre-school children. Charlie would sit on my lap and together we would read her books. We visited book stores and libraries and selected books and magazines that pleased her. We enjoyed her books daily and developed a special time and place for book reading. I would read to her and soon, she read to me. Charlie displayed a healthy interest in all types of print, especially Dr. Seuss books. I sensed she was going to become an active reader. As a bonus, her sister displayed an active interest in Charlie's reading, and the three of us often read together. In this way her sister also guided Charlie's literacy progress, as she enhanced her own.

In addition to the home literacy events, Charlie entered a day-care center noted for helping pre-school children interact with print. Rug-time reading activities were a daily occurrence. This particular center advocated a philosophy that reading with children was an excellent introduction to the value of literacy. I now find that contemporary research in emergent literacy (Cochran-Smith, 1984; Taylor, 1985; Teale, 1987) supports these reading activities for young children.

Charlie, therefore, participated in self expressive,

creative reading events both at home and at day-care. She had practiced home language for six years. She was comfortable learning parental rules and regulations and met my personal verbal expectations for her. I had no reason to believe she was not ready for public education.

Kindergarten

At age six, Charlie enrolled in a kindergarten class. Here she continued to nurture established reading habits and her vocabulary progressed nicely. I thought she would never stop learning about and loving books. She enthusiastically approached class everyday. The class took weekly journeys outside the classroom, absorbing environmental print through several urban conduits, such as the Astrodome, the Summit, and the Hermann Zoo. They visited the downtown main library, the ship-channel, and several suburban malls. They took in the arts during field trips to the Alley Theater, Albert Thomas Convention Center and the Museum of Natural History.

Charlie started writing during kindergarten. A room lined with books written by Charlie and her classmates greeted parents during visiting hours. These books described the memories behind the field trips. The two kindergarten teachers also wrote their memories of these various trips and shared their observations, descriptions, and memories with the children. I saw children and teachers reading these books to each other. Books such as these place a strong emphasis on the knowledge Charlie gained before going to school. Kindergarten was a good year for her. Her teachers' were happy, and so was

her father. When I visited the school, I recognized activities showcasing Charlie's knowledge of letters and words, language competence, and writing.

I now discover that what I observed during Charlie's kindergarten year speaks to contemporary learning research. Holdaway (1979) suggests four ways young children gain literacy abilities. The first is observation of literacy behavior, being read to or seeing teachers read and write themselves. The second is collaboration with an individual who interacts with students, providing encouragement, motivation, and help. The third is practice. Charlie tries out alone existing knowledge while writing. She then experiments without direction or teacher observation. Vygotsky (1978) argues that practice gives children opportunities to evaluate their performance, make corrections, and increase skills. The fourth Holdaway suggestion is performance, where the student shares prior knowledge and seeks approval from teachers who are supportive and interested. Both in school and at home, I observed these learning progressions in Charlie. Clearly, the school detected the same development. Kindergarten reported no learning disabilities, which exalted me. I felt especially proud that Charlie was off on the same good footing as her older sister.

The Elementary Years

The early elementary years gave us a new and different reading perspective. Before first grade, Charlie and I both thought reading was something to enjoy. In the past reading

had opened new doors, granted new experiences, and had provided us a way to enjoy leisure times together. Now reading became work, and took effort.

Elementary school closed the reading door for Charlie. In the first grade, the school placed her in the low reading group based on teacher subjective evaluation. Charlie miscued eleven words in a required story read during the first week of school. As I now remember, she reacted by telling me that she, did not want to go to the book store anymore. She had it in her head that she was not going to be a good reader. I asked her where this idea started. and she replied that book stores gave her new books, whereas in her reading group was still reading old books. I took this to mean that, in first grade, her reading was not challenging, regardless of the teacher's assessment. Charlie continued to read kindergarten level books in the low reading group.

Internally, this placement did not please me. The grouping did not set well. This was a new experience for Charlie and I, and it scared me. As a high school teacher of leveled students, I experienced first hand the effects of homogeneous grouping. For five years, I fought a losing battle with administrative personnel over grouping social studies students. These students brought their school-determined social status into social studies class and declared war against me each semester. I did not want Charlie to be in the trenches when she arrived in high school.

I had difficulty accepting the idea that Charlie would

find reading rigid. Immediately, I visited the school. Her teacher told me, "Charlie is a little nervous." I learned from her teacher that Charlie would not sit still in her desk. She looked out the window and would not attend to her assigned tasks. We agreed to change the seating arrangement to help the perceived nervousness. I asked about the reading problem. The teacher said, "Charlie has poor auditory memories." I wondered what this meant. The teacher told me "Charlie cannot make the link between letters and sounds." I did not know what "making the link" meant, but I knew Charlie did not have a poor memory. Astonished at the term "poor," I internally questioned the teacher's sophistication of the learning process. I mediated the differences in my memories of Charlie's rich emerging learning process and what I was hearing from this teacher.

Being a teacher, I trusted teachers to teach, to know what they were doing. I felt I knew what I was doing on the secondary level regardless of the battle raging between the administration and myself. However, I was not so sure about this teacher. I requested a conference with both the teacher and the principal. At this conference, both told me not to worry, Charlie would eventually mature and learn to read better. Meanwhile, according to the principal, remedial lessons were in order. So, outnumbered, I placed my trust in the school, but continued to worry. I now realize that I made a big mistake in placing this trust. I should have done more than worry. Parents, swayed by society, place a certain,

sometimes presumptuous, confidence in those commissioned to teach children.

Completing each elementary grade, Charlie passed reading and spelling. I was proud of her and her teachers. But, beyond the school, there was a dark side emerging, gaining strength. Charlie did not read as much at home anymore. The good reading times we had before ceased. I noticed this, but did nothing about it. I thought she was learning how to read in school and the good times would soon return.

They did not return during elementary school. Charlie continued to struggle in the low reading group, and she resisted the remedial instruction. Charlie spent more time going to the bathroom and water fountain than she did in the remedial reading class. She found ways to avoid this class, which I thought were "rich" with creativity. For instance, during the second and third grades, she received the remedial teacher's permission to skip class and help create posters for the homecoming festivities. In the fifth grade, the remedial's met class during the last hour of the school day. Charlie kept the score-book for the seventh grade volley-ball and basketball teams.

Elementary school was Charlie's first contact with negative evaluation and labeling. She became confused and faced a difficult choice. She could accept the ability grouping and turn against herself, or reject the negative evaluation and value herself. She rejected the negative evaluation, but accepted the ability grouping.

Labeled dull, unmotivated, and troublemaker during the first few grades, Charlie turned away from the standard public school curriculum. She developed interests in other directions and paid less attention to her school learning. Anthropologists such as McDermott (1985) label this conflict of learning interest as "a strange occurrence." More than one sociologists (Cazden, 1985; Labov, 1964) claim this conflict closes the door on a child's frame of reference. This means the child cannot bring outside prior knowledge into the school context. Postman and Weingartner (1969) argue that students learn only in relation to what they already know. In Charlie's case, the conflict led to her acceptance of an alternative curriculum during the middle school years. The record keeping duty mentioned earlier was one example of Charlie moving toward the alternative curriculum.

Competitive sports start for middle school students in the seventh grade. Charlie's drive toward athletic acceptance started during this school year. The alternative curriculum diverted her attention from the classroom to the playground. I recognized the diversion each year when she came home discussing the new reading classes, the low and remedial groups. The school placed her in reading groups taking her from friends, diverting attention from real reading and replacing it with structured exercises. Charlie began to attend to outside learning activities and teachers began to lose her. However, the coaches and auxiliary school personnel did not lose her. She became involved in every after school

activity offered. Charlie devoted much more effort and attention toward these particular school people than she did toward regular classroom teachers. After school, extra-curricular activities took up her time. So much so, she found excuses not to finish regular classroom assignments.

The Middle School

During these years, I received a quarterly report from the school declaring Charlie was not smart. The middle school told me, regularly, that my child was dumb. I received many poorly written letters addressed to the parent of Charlie. One reads

"Dear Mr. Charlie,

Your daughter took the....last October, 19.. The results have been received at....School and show that Charlie failed to demonstrate mastery of the....section of the test. Enclosed please find a copy of the Confidential Student Report.

Charlie will be assigned to tutorials that begin in...19.. She will be required to attend those classes until she takes the test again in May. If she completes all other requirements for the....grade without passing....she will not receive a....., but instead will receive a.....

Please feel free to contact me if you need any further information. We need to work together to help your daughter pass.... and....on schedule.

Sincerely yours,

.....
Administrative Assistant/Counselor

These letters made me feel melancholy. Before I left the post office, I threw them in the wastebasket. Johnson (1982) argues that written communication is much like a game. Those who know its rules and have a command of good English play it better than those who do not. The administrative assistant/counselor who wrote the quarterly warning letters

clearly did not have command of good English. The letter contained several undesirable qualities: passive voice, redundancy, overused phrases. Yet, this was one of the school leaders who controlled the rules by which children like Charlie must play. During these years, Charlie was a permanent member of the remedial reading class, no longer in a low reading group. When reading class started, she left the regular classroom bound for another, singled out and separated, away from normal school routine.

I wondered about these classes and visited the school more than once. I found she received the same instruction for remediation as she was getting in the low reading class, only more of it. When she could not or would not pass a certain test of reading skills, the school placed her in a special class. The class offered more practice on whatever it was she could not read. The principal noted school policy called for corporal punishment. He suggested this as a motivational tool. I vetoed this suggestion, but did not have an answer that would improve the test scores. He informed me the school was doing its best by Charlie, but many children did not learn to read until properly motivated. The principals patronizing suggestion momentarily blurred my thinking, because I knew no school was going to improve test scores by using corporal punishment. I did not like test scores due to unhappy experiences with them as a high school teacher. Now, I realize that I am not alone in that assessment.

I did not know what to do about Charlie's reading

problem, but I did not think punishment would be the answer. Rather than leave the problem in the hands of school people, Charlie and I decided not to worry anymore about test scores and remedial instruction. We decided to let the school play their games during the day and we would play ours after regular school. Charlie was now becoming active in volleyball, basketball and track. I regarded this action as positive and encouraged her participation. If Charlie could not excel in academics, maybe she could achieve in extra-curricular activities. She had at least found an alternative curriculum that was positive and self-fulfilling. Personally, I could not understand the schools position, but I could understand my child's position. After Charlie entered high school, we did not have to contend with remedial instruction.

Meanwhile, I tried to recapture the good reading times at home. Charlie had not learned to read well in spite of six long years already spent in the public school classroom. I introduced her to the Judy Blume books. These books captured her attention for a short time. She read every one we could find, but soon there were no more. Internally, I believed she could read, but for some reason she would not perform for the public school. I wondered about this. A middle school child who looks forward to reading the Blume books at home should be able to read at school.

The middle school content classes offered only the raw materials of reading for Charlie. The basal texts in Texas are skills-based and closely tied to "stair-stepped" mastery

learning. Apparently, Charlie viewed middle school reading as a difficult decoding game having little to do with the meanings she found in the Blume books. She was not playing the game according to school rules. In turn, not being picked for the reading team in the first grade, she found another team which picked her early. She accepted an athletic peer group as her new source of self and rebelled against the middle school reading. Bettelheim and Zelan (1981) argue that motivation is a key element in students learning to and continuing to read. Smith (1988) argues that interest and expectation of learning are excellent predictors of learning. Willis (1981) demonstrates that learning forms in the process of student's rebelling against the institutions, schools, that have dominance over them. In Charlie's case, the motivation for reading was present in kindergarten, but elementary school erased her motivation through its system of tracking. Charlie's desire to become an athlete affirms her internal presence of motivation and external rebellion against skill-based school instruction.

High School

In a massive effort at school reform, Texas sought to start a rigid philosophy of "no pass, no play." Students must attain certain academic standards to participate in school-related activities. In practice, this policy heightens the role of athletics as the reason for attending to academics, with athletic participation the reward for persevering through academics. Now that Charlie is in high school, these pass-fail

standards do not seem to bother her. She participates in coursework so she remains eligible for other activities.

Charlie continues to tolerate standard high school curricula, but only so she can excel in athletics. These alternative activities demand more time, and are more effective for her than regular school learning. This lifestyle is attractive. It offers personalized discipline such as anti-academic attention patterns. Her attention, tuned to the "thump-thump" of a basketball, ignores "noun-verb" agreements. The alternative lifestyle has its own curriculum. Rather than study the questions at the end of the chapter, Charlie now studies a text crammed with basketball diagrams. Regular schoolwork has not challenged her. Yet, her outside curriculum is rich with challenges. The continuing enthusiasm for sports reflects the pre-school success with literacy.

As a senior, Charlie struggles with reading, especially in the content areas. She does not have to contend with remedial reading classes anymore. She reads at home, not as much as I would like, but apparently as much as she cares to. She reads "teen" magazines, while daily newspapers and monthly magazines gather dust on the living room coffee table. Occasionally, I recommend a novel I have read, but to no avail. Her recreational reading belongs to her and I salute this ownership because I know Charlie can read. She just does not want to read school related materials. And, several authorities on reading agree (Freebody & Baker, 1985; Goodman, Shannon, Freeman & Murphy, 1988; and Johns & Ellis, 1976).

Charlie reads her textbook assignments by skimming through, "hunting and pecking" for an answer to questions from the end of the chapter. I call it the search and seizure syndrome, search the pages and seize the answers. She is also good at listening attentively to teachers and peers, doing a minimum of homework, borrowing someone else's workbook or notes. She is extremely proficient at "apple polishing" teachers. For instance, she talked a math teacher into giving her repeated exams until the grade met the standard. Yet, she cannot meet the state's standards for rounding numbers.

Charlie has coping strategies for academic tasks. However, I do not think these strategies are markedly different from the norm. Many students use selected strategies to achieve school-standard grades. Today Charlie is not interested in mean-proportion grades. Instead, she uses her strategies to get what she wants. In this case, her goal is a starting position on the basketball team. She did not learn to drive a car one step at a time. Charlie got in the car and drove off using all her facilities simultaneously. The point here is that Charlie's athletic ambition defines what is learned and how it is learned. In the conflict between reading what the school wants or what she wants, the school lost. Charlie reads what she wants to read and she choses the strategies she wants to use for the act of reading.

Looking Back

At first, both the public schools and I neglected Charlie's reading progress. I did not question teachers enough

about the school's grouping practice. This was a mistake on my part as a parent-teacher. It is a common practice that teachers do not question other teacher methodology. Yet, I believe this is an aberration of professional courtesy. Schools must share the cost for cleaving to a rigid tracking philosophy. Parents deserve to feel secure when their children are in the hands of agents of the state.

Turning now to Charlie's inability to accept structured instruction, I note and offer comments concerning the school's disregard for research findings. I see Charlie's problems rooted in social separation, standardized test scores, and remedial instruction. These three problems network, creating social learning conflicts between teachers and children.

First, Charlie is not a member of Smith's (1985) literacy club. Today, she does not worry about it. The methods of exclusion have been so subtle that none of the actors realized their involvement in the process. I do not know if the school realizes or understands its role. Yet, a communication breakdown continues to create extra pressure on both Charlie and the school. Social separation is the subject of extensive research. Rist (1970) defines tracking as separation for social purposes. Hiebert (1983) cites it as ability grouping, and Rosenthal (1985) calls it the cumulative self-fulfilling prophecy. Regardless of label, Goffman's (1986) stigma of detachment was present throughout Charlie's school life, a blemish she will probably carry into adulthood.

Second, Owen (1985) argues that standardized test scores

are dragging students, such as Charlie, down a "track" of no return. The schools Charlie attended tracked her too early and left her on track too long. When promoted to another grade, the schools promoted her test scores and her stigma of tracking as well. These scores reflect her permanent school-related disabilities. Yet, I do not believe they mirror learning disabilities.

I now doubt that Charlie will "jump track" short of graduation. She has squandered eleven years "on track." Only now as a senior in high school, does she feel free to express self. She has enough credits to graduate, yet must still contend with Texas mandated requirements for graduation. That is, Charlie must pass another test before she can call herself a high school graduate.

Kozol (1985) argues that these tracking schemes are more popular than ever. The good news is that they are being questioned. Critical theorists (Apple, 1982; Aronowitz, 1973; Giroux, 1982), view them as outdated educational theories serving to divide social groups and maintain social boundaries that exist in the broader culture outside of schools. Forster (1964) would agree that grouping children place schools only a stone's throw away from the imposed silence of Marabar's cave where there is no sound but that of the cave itself. In effect, grouping and standardized test scores create and then reify a reality that is unassailable and clandestinely subjective. That grouping does not work is old news to those in reading research. In a series of studies

Allington (1980a, 1980b) found children in high ability reading groups read two or three times as many words as children in low groups. McDermott (1985) argues that once classified, readers become chained to their social strata with differentiated instruction.

Third, the remedial, instructional approach to remediation is, of course, theory based. Yet, there may be as many approaches to remediation as problems. Flesch (1981) argues that when children come to a dead end in their reading progress, they require an extended structural approach before risking additional exposure to new reading. Flesch is, of course, supported politically by powerful researchers in literacy, who would have remedial instruction focus on discrete sub skills of literacy (cf. Gough, Groff, LaBerge & Samuels). I see this approach as contradictory and redundant. It certainly was with Charlie. I make this statement because children should never come to a dead end in their literacy progress. They will not cease reading without a determinate external force. In many children, such as Charlie, a corrective approach may actually make the deficiency ashamed. Her isolated skill-based remediation appears to be a clumsy, unreliable system when compared with her pre-school reading success. Tovey and Kerber (1986) argue many teachers have a dislike for research findings and theory. Reading teachers need more descriptive input to help them understand how children apply their previously gained knowledge to the task of learning to read. Smith (1981) argues there is a need for

more longitudinal and ethnographic studies, like those of Sulzby (1987) and Heath (1984), describing how children come to make sense of print. If reading research counts in the lives of school children, then effective schools and their teachers will value descriptive accounts of how literacy works in outside of school contexts.

Looking Ahead

Charlie and I were not strong enough to hurdle learning roadblocks between successful beginnings and unsettled futures. She may have difficulty with literacy expectations she encounters in higher education. Charlie believes she is a deficient reader. Her internalized reading repertoire appear to hold nothing for her. The public school years taught us extensively about learning. You have to stay on your toes. Learning is something to keep close to your vest. You must work hard to protect it from institutional erosion.

During the past decade, Charlie endured the school ways of gaining knowledge. Now, preparing for college, she realizes that all knowledge is not school related. For the most part, Charlie grasped this by herself. Yet, once I understood what she was doing, I became an avid supporter. At that time, we shut down all accountability schemes offered by a sterile school system which was dominated by quantitative views of learning. We gradually replaced the school-structured, mainstream, curriculum driven theories by an alternative and more comfortable, but difficult, philosophy. As for me, I see these schemes treating knowledge as something

measured, managed, and then consumed. I do not want that type of education for my children.

Instead, I view knowledge as something to understand and analyze with the experiences my children bring to their activities. In addition, we disregard school structured methodologies which generalize across all students. My objective is to help Charlie become a critical, self-determined individual. In replacing objective accounts with ones more subjectively oriented, I have attempted to ease the public school pressure. In addition, Charlie and I can reconceptualize the future collegiate difficulties she will undoubtedly face. Fortunately, like her early reading experiences, she is a receptive listener and a "quick learn." Yet, the roadblocks are still difficult to hurdle, old habits die hard. She continues to spend many hours daily inside the confines of a public school. This context makes our task more difficult.

The Father's Agenda

During Charlie's sophomore year, I decided to take a more active role in her future. In doing so, I enrolled in graduate reading studies. Here, I found ways of learning to read other than drills and repetition. Since that time, I attempted to turn Charlie from the school's ways of learning to more natural ways. Although I continue to encourage her to do whatever, within reason, the school asks, I tell her not to worry about number grades. I do this because society demands a high school diploma to enter college. Yet, I believe we lost

the numbers battle several grade levels ago.

Charlie scored low on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (ETS, 1989). She does not mind the low score, counting on her athletic ability instead. She depends on this ability to get accepted by her college of choice. The points put on the scoreboard during a basketball game are more important to her than the points missed in multiple choice. Failing a scholarship for athletics, I foresee Charlie entering a two year college near home and later transferring to a four-year institution. If Charlie advances to a four year institution I anticipate she will graduate and be a success in her own right. That is her right, to move in her own direction. In making these statements, I am aware this may not be Charlie's agenda. If it is not, then that is all right too. My responsibility as a father is to support all items on her agenda.

Children like Charlie are not slow learners. Neither are they dumb nor uneducated. They learn something each day. The problem is that some of them are not necessarily learning what society and schools want them to learn. That leaves those of us interested in the welfare of children like Charlie, to make an internal decision. The future of these children and these schools are at stake. It comes down to a choice. Do we want schools for our children to be places where community values are inculcated and obedience to authority instilled? Or do we want schools to be marketplaces of ideas where children shed the trappings of the past and seek their own identity?

Although, there is no consensus on the answer, I would support the second ideology for my children.

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